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ABSTRACT

Earlier research has shown that young adults exhibit less favorable reactions to older speakers than to peers, especially on the competence dimension. To examine the role of speaker effectiveness in modifying evaluations of younger and older adults, undergraduates (N=80) received a map of a hospital floor plan and listened to either an effective or an ineffective taped text describing a route on the map. Texts were read by older and younger adult males. Subjects estimated the speaker's age and rated the speaker on accuracy of directions, competence, benevolence, social class, perceived belief similarity, and social distance. Results showed that along the competence dimension, the overwhelming difference in communication effectiveness was the only significant factor. Thus, concrete information about an individual's abilities largely outweighed any initial impressions related to age stereotyping. Along the benevolence dimension, however, communication ineffectiveness did not lead to significantly less favorable benevolence judgments of older adults. For this second key interpersonal dimension, age stereotyping did attenuate the influence of communication performance. This influence occurred even though speakers were perceived, on the average, to be middle-aged. The particular downgrading of the young ineffective speaker was as predicted. Contrary to expectation, no evidence for upgrading the older effective speaker was observed. (NRB)

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Paper presented at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Antonio.

THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATIVE EFFECTIVENESS ON EVALUATIONS OF YOUNGER AND OLDER ADULT SPEAKERS.

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THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS ON EVALUATIONS OF YOUNGER AND OLDER ADULT SPEAKERS.

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Attitudes toward old age and toward elderly persons form a central part of social psychological research in gerontology. Beginning with the work of Tuckman and Lorge (1952), research findings have tended to reveal relatively negative views of the elderly (Bennett & Eckman, 1973; Kogan & Shelton, 1962). Recent reviews (Kogan, 1979; Lutsky, 1980), however, have argued that the evidence is actually quite mixed and rather difficult to interpret because of a host of methodological problems.

Earlier research in which age has not been an obvious target of evaluation has shown that young adults exhibit less favorable reactions to older speakers than to their peers, especially in terms of the competence dimension (Ryan & Capadano, 1978; Sebastian, Ryan, & Abbott, 1981). However, such evaluations are altered by additional information regarding the target individuals such as speech rate (Stewart & Ryan, 1982).

The present study was intended to examine the role of speaker effectiveness in modifying evaluations of younger and older adults. We predicted main effects for age and effectiveness as well as an interaction between the two factors. Due to disconfirmation of expectations (Jones & McGillis, 1976), we predicted especially

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strong downgrading of the young ineffective speaker and an upgrading of the older effective speaker.

Method

Eighty university undergraduates received course credit for their participation.

A map with the floor plan of a hypothetical hospital was prepared. Two texts (approximately 150 wds.) describing the route from the lobby to the x-ray department were written - an effective message with clear, unambiguous, appropriately detailed information and an ineffective message with ambiguous information and inappropriate details. Four young adult males (ages 20-25 years) and four older males (ages 65-75 years) prepared tape recordings of each message after practicing a natural presentation. The effective message was presented with confidence at a moderately fast rate, whereas the ineffective message was presented more slowly and hesitantly.

In a language laboratory, subjects participated in groups of 5-20. Through earphones, each listener heard his own 'communication partner' present a description of the map route. Listeners were asked to draw the route on their copy of the map and then to rate the speaker on a number of 7-point likert scales. In addition to judging how accurately they were able to draw the map and estimating the speaker's age, listeners rated the speaker along the dimensions of competence (4 scales) and benevolence (4 scales) as well as social class, perceived belief similarity, and social distance. Each speaker was heard by approximately the same number of respondents in his effective guise as in his ineffective guise.

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Results

Initially, manipulation checks for age and communication effectiveness were conducted. Although the ages of the older men were substantially underestimated (M=49.7 yrs), the difference in age estimates between them and the younger men (M=26.3 yrs) was highly significant, F (1,76)= 108.3, $p<.001$. The effects of message effectiveness were significant both on objective measures of route drawing, F (1, 76) = 27.7, $p<.001$, and on listeners' subjective evaluations of their accuracy, F (1, 76) = 43.2, $p<.001$.

Separate two-factor analyses of variance were conducted for the average competence and benevolence ratings. No main effects for age were obtained. For competence evaluations, the effect for message effectiveness was significant, F (1, 75)= 83.1, $p<.001$. Similarly, analysis of the benevolence evaluations yielded a main effect for effectiveness, F (1, 73) = 30.3, $p<.001$. Examination of the means in Figures 1 and 2 indicates that the effectiveness factor influenced ratings of younger speakers more dramatically than the older speakers, especially for benevolence. A significant interaction with age was obtained for benevolence, F (1, 73) = 8.7, $p<.01$, whereas the similar trend for competence was not significant, $p<.11$. Analyses of the simple effects revealed that benevolence ratings were significantly lower for ineffective young speakers than for effective young speakers, F (1,38) = 40.1, $p<.001$; but the difference was not significant for ratings of older speakers, $p<.12$.

The pattern of findings for other social ratings was much like that for the competence dimension. That is, main effects for effectiveness alone occurred for ratings of social class, belief

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similarity, and social distance.

Discussion

Along the competence dimension, the overwhelming difference in communication effectiveness was the only significant factor (see Crockett, Press, & Osterkamp, 1979). Thus, concrete information about an individual's abilities as communicated in this paradigm largely outweighed any initial impressions related to age stereotyping. Along the benevolence dimension, however, communication ineffectiveness did not lead to significantly less favorable benevolence judgments of older adults. For this second key interpersonal dimension, age stereotyping did attenuate the influence of communication performance. It should be noted that this influence occurred even though speakers were perceived, on the average, to be middle-aged. The benevolence findings of particular downgrading of the young ineffective speaker are congruent with the disconfirmation prediction (see Stier & Kline, 1980). Contrary to expectation, no evidence for upgrading of the older effective speaker was observed.

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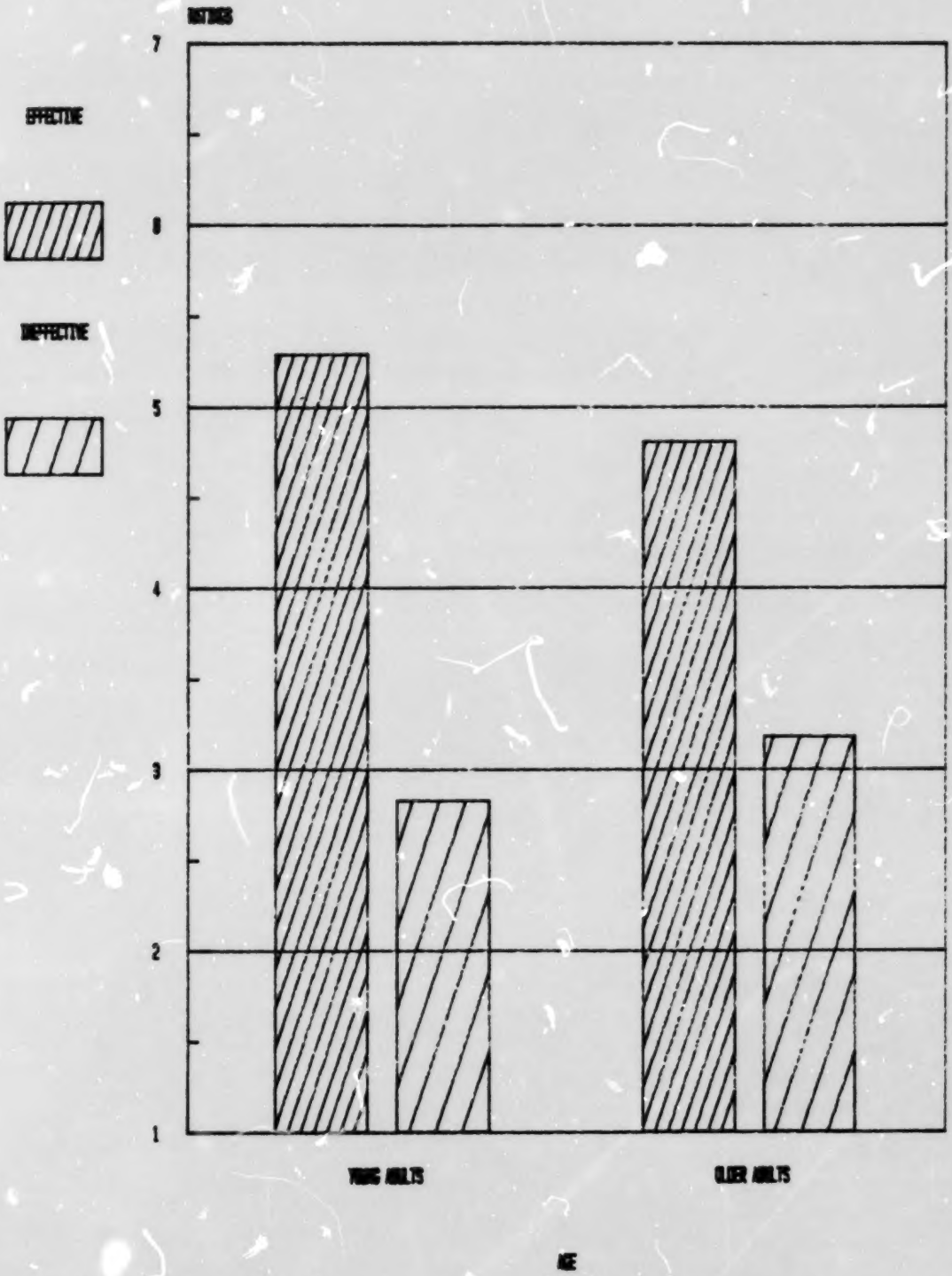
COMPETENCE EVALUATIONS OF SPEAKERS



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